



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

*On the Law of spontaneous and voluntary Association.* By the Rev. JAMES WILLS.

---

Read June 28, 1847.

---

COMPLEX ideas, so far as they are properly the results of any mental process, can be traced to three different kinds of operations, all of which have a common principle, while each has some peculiar difference in its origin and use, such as to require a separate investigation.

First among these are the combinations framed from the habitual recurrence in union, or constant succession, of the same phenomena or ideas. Those I have discussed in my first Paper.

Secondly, those ideas which are the results of accidental combination : these, like the former, are independent of the voluntary powers of mind ; and, like them too, depend directly on the primary modes of perception and apprehension, being communicated through the sense from without.

Lastly, those spontaneous or voluntary associations which have the origin of their combination *within the mind*, though framed from the same common elements.

Of the last-mentioned class, it is at first view perceptible that it must involve a law of combination different from either of the former ; for, while these severally represent some external process, act, or combination, this latter class now to be examined have their origin wholly within the mind, and are not the representations of any external reality. To the actions or objects of the external world, they bear the relation that the fancy picture may bear to the portrait or sketch taken from nature ; the elements of the idea are the same, but the combination different, and, in some important respects, differently obtained. The inventive mind may conceive the idea of a winged griffin as distinctly as it can recall the appearance of a strange man. Of the idea thus formed, not one line of form, or expression, may resemble any thing existent or described

in fiction: yet all the components must still be the familiar simple ideas of sensation and reflection; and a more minute analysis would ascertain that, in its elementary constitution, the very process too is still the same. What then must be the essential difference of this class of associations? Plainly, in the *MODE* according to which the process of combination has operated. It is a process dependent upon habit,—yet producing ideas formally new. These ideas are not, like the first class, results of repetition; nor, like the second, revivals from observation: yet the materials are the same, and the combinations (considered as ideas) similar.

On strict examination of the most extravagant conception which can be reduced into form by the mind, there can in every instance be traced some primary *law of form*, by which the process of combination will have been controlled and aided. Without this elementary principle, there might be a verbal description, but no idea which could be framed or conveyed, unless by some process wholly different from any here intended. Upon trial it will easily be discovered, that the effort to frame some wholly abnormal or monstrous conception would not be attended with the same common facility as when the idea attempted to be framed is such as to be in a manner referrible to some known or preconceived type,\* standard of form, or law of real or ideal combination. This *typal law* is then the law of the specific process by which ideas of this class are combined. This principle is evidently the most elementary application of the law of analogy—which in its most extended sense, is the most universal law of thought. It is the law of order by which ideas are framed, and from hence in a measure will be found to arise its connexion with the different functions of reason. In this class of applications it is directed by the initial purpose, and variously modified by the habits and constitution of the mind. For illustration, suppose the idea of a house: there is no abstract idea of a house; but there are standards of form, according to which an idea, more or less complex and distinct, will instantaneously obey the purpose of the mind. The type in one mind may be a hut, in another's a palace. One may conceive a vague and indistinct shadow of a fabric; another will give sharpness and symmetry of structure, commodious-

\* It is not necessary that this type should be real; it may belong to a class of fictitious things. It is enough that (in any way) a standard of class has been fixed or attained.

ness of division, and splendour of colouring and design. But this process will have been rendered possible by the habitual conception of a certain law of order, in which known materials, uses, and properties are commonly combined. The general law, or type, thus supplies the normal element of the conception of the mind.

It may give clearness to this statement to observe, that the same law of combination, which in nature or external reality constitutes class, mode of action, or specific existence, and appears to belong to the entire class of habitual combinations explained in the first section, is the same typical law of the mind in the formation of the spontaneous or voluntary class of combinations. To call this type *an idea*, in the *received sense*, would be to re-assert the exploded doctrine of abstract ideas. But I have no hesitation to claim for it the precise place in the intellectual theory which could properly be assigned to the abstract idea. When the same combination of sensible qualities is seen to recur in constant proportions, or to vary with any law of uniform change, this constant or uniformly varying law must have itself, by the common tendency of habit, become a fixed idea, of which the direct sense is that of a law of combination. And if either distinct purpose or casual suggestion should turn the mind towards the main elements of this combination, they may, according to this law of thought, coalesce with the instantaneous action of habit; while the initial impulse of accident or purpose will, by supplying their first element, modify the particular form. And, as in the former classes of associations, in this it becomes unnecessary to consider the components as having any separate existence—the combination executed by a single act is the sole idea.

This process is not, however, limited necessarily to this simple operation of habit. The several processes of the mind variously combine. The combination which may be the result of one process may be supposed to enter as a simple component into the idea framed by a different. All the moral tendencies are similarly subject to the same law of mind; a deep emotion, a prejudice or antipathy, or even a result of pure inference, may become components of the same idea of form, colour, and place. The components of a complex structure of ideal form may be the separate results of operations of different kinds carried on through life; a hundred rules of taste, reason, sentiment, art, may be included in the idea of an instant. All these elements may have become

embodied in a law of structure; and indeed, it may be observed, there is no habitual process to which this condition will not apply.

But it is not necessary to assume that, in the actual uses of this process, the entire operation by which a new idea is completed is confined to the one single act here described. It is enough that a single process can give ideal existence to a single result. The operation under investigation is, like every operation subject to the will, capable of continued action and repetition. The act of invention may consist of several distinct conceptions, or may be improved and extended by many repetitions of the same; or may be completed by further successive additions. The mind may love to dwell upon its own conceptions; and, regarding them as ideas, it is evident that the effect must be, in *kind*, the same as if they had been the results of external circumstance. The castle-builder lives more in the unreal scenery of his imagination than in the world of reality; nor does life offer events, or awaken feelings, that have not their ideal representation among these creations of conceptual power. Whether the mind is set to work by the sober purposes of inventive design, by the random impulse of suggestion, or the idle desire of amusement, the purpose and the typical law of combination supply the two sufficient first elements. From and according to these, the materials will simultaneously, without separate notice or effort, coalesce according to the special knowledge, habits, and character of the mind engaged. Objects remembered, or fancies remembered, will present themselves among these materials, and the successive acts of thought which may alter or extend the result will yet be processes of the same nature.

It is worthy of observation, that in the course of a continuation or successive repetition of this operation, the mind may, as in the business of life, enter into courses of calculation and inquiry, according to the usual laws of these processes, without abandoning its main result. In the effort to conceive a scene of maritime danger or enterprise, some difficulty may arise from the incompleteness of the type; the very part involved in the particular occurrence may be wanting in the thinker's idea of a ship; or some combination of cliff, wind, and wave, may be the feature required; the natural desire for distinctness and accuracy may be so felt as to arrest the course of thought, and the dreamer of storms may find himself reasoning upon physical and mechanical effect and cause.

It may also be in some measure useful to observe, how the habitual errors,

superstitions, and prejudices, or fallacious impressions of the mind, may combine in this process in a manner which would be prevented by any distinct application of the attention or reason. Thus, for example, the homes of our ancestors, or of ancient ages of history, come upon the mind's eye, inseparably associated with appearances which we fully know to be in reality the marks of decay. If we think of the life of last century, there will arise a character of something past away, but to be excluded from the conception; it is hard to conceive the modern light of day upon those times which history calls the dark ages: in despite of reason, they rise in murky twilight to the conception.

Thus, to sum the foregoing statements, the mind may, by a process of combination dependent upon an habitual *law* of form or agglomeration, frame new ideas. These may vary according to the habits of the mind, but must always be formed according to an ideal type, of which the mind has habitual possession. This type is not necessarily true, it is enough that it is habitual. Neither is there any rule of uniform identity, in virtue of which the ideal standard must be precisely similar in all minds, or in the same mind for different periods. Of these fundamental analogies of thought, some are derived from external realities, and have in different minds that degree of similarity which must result from the sameness or similarity of the origin; some too may be supposed to result from uniform laws of our moral or intellectual nature: and thus it is that, in the extremest excursions of imagination or fancy, there is preserved a common language and general standard of expression and representation. But the mind of every individual is still in possession of numerous accidental types proper to itself, and framed from the common origin of association and expression, by which every act, however complex or peculiar, is susceptible of ideal modification, according to the character of the mind.

On the difference between minds I am not prepared to enter; but there can be no doubt that these differences exist; and that both the kinds and the degrees in which they are subject to observation are very considerable. But they must depend upon somewhat in the elementary nature of the mind; and this is wholly beyond the grasp of human philosophy. All that has been said or written upon the subject can easily be shewn to be gratuitous and unsupported. But it is not difficult to perceive that, through the whole range of the intellectual operations, there is a fundamental prevalence of the same laws of

thought. For this there seems to be some antecedent probability. For as these laws can be actually proved to work over a large compass of operation, and to include so much as I have endeavoured to demonstrate,\* there seems to be a needless complication in assuming the existence of other latent elementary processes, so far as these may be applied without undue refinement. And hence I only follow one of the most approved rules of analogical reasoning, when I observe, that I do not think it necessary to enter into the entire detail of the arguments which I might advance to prove the strict application of the same process of voluntary association, as well to the inventions of pure reason as to the instantaneous combinations of the artist or poet. To facilitate the analysis of these applications, I shall only offer a few remarks to point out the application of the common principle.

A little observation will be sufficient to convince any one who may have agreed in the previous explanations, that in all the constructive operations of thought there must be one law:—the same law of analogy must be the guide of combination. The possible combinations of ideas are infinite, and it is evident that no train or combination could be found for any, even the lightest purpose, unless by the help of some settled rule, however derived. The reasoner has earlier or later, with more or less precision and force, acquired a sense or law of probability. This law may be very remote, or a very near approximation; it may be brought, by a long succession of corrections, to approach the reality; or may, by a clear and luminous conception, in a mind disciplined by the force of its own orderly conceptional action, be struck out at a glance. Some minds habitually think according to probability founded on experiences,—some according to types and standards of form,—some according to moral analogies; but, for all, the same pure elementary principle seems to apply.

These considerations may help to explain, and are illustrated by, some well-marked facts respecting the various known characters of different classes of teachers and writers, and are capable of very extensive practical application. I shall, however, confine myself to so much as may serve to confirm or illustrate what I have hitherto stated.

Among the varied and numerous classes of scientific reasoners, there is to be

\* The attentive reader will perceive that this term here is not used in its logical sense, but rather in that of the anatomy schools.

observed a well-marked distinction between the many who display the most prompt and acute apprehension, vast retention, so as to master with comparative ease all that mind can do, and the very few who shew any considerable power to strike out a new result. And upon a closer inquiry it will even be found in some measure true, that these latter are frequently defective in the quality by which the former are distinguished. Indeed no two classes of thinkers are more different, or more likely to be confounded, by loose observers. One person may devote his life to science, and know all that is known, and possess the most lucid power of exposition, and labour for a long life at elementary works, and not strike out a single gleam of new light: another will hardly have mastered the rudimental elements, when the brain becomes haunted by conceptions, and the intellect attracted into new, unthought-of directions leading to invention.

The same consideration may be applied, though under very different apparent circumstances, in the walk of art and general literature. In the consideration of these it would lead too far were I to explain why the same or similar results may seem to be attained by widely different operations; but this will be in some degree obvious from the following explanation. There is in the nature of things no reason why the same combination which is the result of a spontaneous association, may not be constructed, according to an ascertained rule, by the most detailed process of mere art. In the picture, the poem, or any work of art, such is the frequent occurrence. As the processes of the understanding become more complex, and as active energy seems more to enter into the result, it seems probable, and agrees with experience, to conclude that the power on which they depend must be more subject to greater degrees of inequality in different individuals. And from this it is to be explained, why men of genius in any department of human effort are more rare, as the nature of the produce demands higher and more varied or remote combinations. Thus the wider and more complex combinations of mathematics, whether analytic or synthetic, are the produce of few minds; and, on the other extreme (as it were), the combinations of fancy, or the standard creations of poetic power, are not less rare; while in both, and through the entire intermediate range of art, considerable power is continually exercised in the production of similar though not equal results by a mode of operation which for distinctness



I may call *constructive*. In these the *rules* of art or science take the place of the *standard* of conception, or of the normal law of reason; every distinct component of the result is elaborately sought and selected by the exercise of judgment and the precedent of experience; every part is computed, adapted, or modelled by known standard models. The sculptor may have some celebrated work of art, or some living model, either before his eye or in his memory, and he is stored with rules of form; but he may be wholly without the self-created standard, which is the typical law which the mind has framed for itself out of the same elements.

If it were to be asked, by what means the difference of the two methods here asserted can be ascertained in the result; the test, only perceptible to the most refined criticism, is still decided enough. The higher graces of expression in art depend on refinements of form, niceties of combination, and reaches of conception not susceptible of the coarse measurement of elementary rules, and therefore can be but imperfectly attained by their aid, and when attained, are sure to carry the stamp of imitation. In all such efforts, remove the model and you extinguish the thought; the mind has framed no ideal combination, and there is before it nothing.

This test may derive much practical distinctness from the following consideration. The actual presence to the mind of a distinct conception of any reality,—for clearness I will say of any sensible reality,—has in a very high degree the effect of actual and sensible reality. It bears with it components which belong to the suggestions of memory or actual presence. We may for illustration suppose that a mountain scene is to be painted from fancy. The constructive method will resort to numerous known characters of such scenery; the most approved models of cliff and precipice, and rules of distance and colouring, will supply a sufficient approach to the truth of nature. But one glance at the reality of nature, in its most ordinary dress, will probably shame the best representations that mere art can reach. Now the effect of the other mode would be different; for the type of conception is framed from the habitual observation of *effects*—the very component wanting in every constructive system. And again, the effect of the former is that of *presence*. There is an actual idea (all that presence can give) to be contemplated, retouched, wrought upon by fancy, feeling, or even by the computations of the constructive method.

In the use of language this test can be more distinctly found, and I might take examples from every page of poetry, to apply it. A single image, conveyed in a word, and struck from the writer's mind unconsciously in the heat of composition, may be such as to have required more refined and subtle reasoning and calculations of the rules of adaptation and effect,—more considerations of the shades of feeling, the law of human apprehension, and the suggestive powers of language in its more refined and less direct applications,—than a volume might contain, or than have yet entered into the science of the rhetorician. Yet this feat of conception is executed *currente calamo*, and leaves as little trace of any process as a vessel leaves upon the waters. Now to the reader this quality may be known by a test nearly infallible; for though the effect of distinct conception may chance to be produced by accident, it cannot occur *characteristically*. It is the result of a method which (while in operation), to some considerable extent, excludes the employment of constructive methods; and of which the constant operation will be to work out its effects by the indirect means of suggestion: in reality it is the *effect* that is itself expressed, and not the detail. By the law of association, a feature, a movement, or a circumstance, conveys the *whole* to which it belongs. Now the idea, modified by the purpose, communicates the leading feature so as to give its distinctive character to the combination in which it consists. And thus the effect on the thinker's own mind is instantaneous; his type presents itself dressed, featured, and coloured, in accordance with the specific suggestion of the moment, and he is supplied with expression to combine them so as to place the reader in his own position. He *sees* what the constructive artist calculates, and from the effect of presence the effect of reality is produced; the sentiment is awakened, and his thoughts become infused with the peculiar expression, which nothing but the sense of actual present reality can communicate without the aid of this process. The mind, working by mere art, may accumulate all the terrors of a storm, and combine them with the utmost truth; but they can only *impart information* as to characteristic effect, they will only reach to elaborate commonplace, or too familiar imitation; a single word will give the whole, and bring the sympathies of the reader into the very scene of the poet's thought.

In offering this illustration, I am not sure that it can convey much, without the help of numerous examples, which would prolong this essay beyond its in-

portance. I shall, therefore, add one of a different kind, which may perhaps be more easily applied without the help of instances. Every one must be aware of the intuitive rapidity with which the expressions of the human face are perceived and interpreted, and this by some process in which there is evidently no mixture of inferential reasoning. The precise nature of this process is here immaterial; we have only to consider one of its consequences; for, however acquired, it is an universal type, belonging to most, perhaps to all minds. There is a fine analogy, or law of characteristic expression, in consequence of which every vague line will occasionally convey an instantaneous ideal image of human features. I have already, for another purpose, detailed this operation in the first Essay on this subject, and explained in what manner a casual gleam of expression is suggestive of a combination to which it can be referred.\* This is, however, but a common case of a general law, whereby the partial line suggests a whole, by reference to some typical law, or fixed analogy.

For the sake of clearness, it has been necessary to distinguish the constructive and associatory processes, by marking the opposite characters which exist between them. But though each in its utmost completeness may be considered to belong to minds of very different classes, yet as there is no human mind without every element which belongs to man's nature, so there is in reality no extended operation of the constructive or conceptual kind that must not to some extent involve that of the other. It is only in those higher or more extreme exertions of the moral or intellectual qualities, which seem to indicate some distinct operation as their principal element, that the special process thus developed can be distinctly traced. Some minds, and some products of mind, indicate the result of some one mode of operation, some of another; and thus by attentive observation much may be very clearly ascertained, that is by no means so easily demonstrated. The utmost that can be done in the analysis of mind is a just appeal to the self-observation of others.

And here, before I proceed further, I may apply these considerations to explain an observation of that truly great philosopher, Mr. LOCKE, which has, I think, been somewhat mistaken. I mean his distinction between wit and judgment, by which he describes wit as consisting in a perception of similarities, and judgment of differences in our ideas. The observation was but casual, and

\* Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, vol. xix. p. 92.

not the result of a deliberate analysis; but I think it a very remarkable proof of the clear-sighted discrimination which Mr. LOCKE seems to have possessed beyond most known men. The objection which appears to apply to his remark is, that the same observation by which differences or similarities are perceivable, should equally apply to both. Now, first observing, that in Mr. LOCKE's time, the term "wit" was understood in a sense co-extensive with imagination, it will easily appear that the objection is a mere quibble, which confounds two operations in no way related, and which are not coextensive in application. The one being the apprehension of certain analogies, or laws of form and relation; the other a distinct act of observation, applied to special objects, and not arising from any habitual process. The one being a conscious act, the other a habitual process. So far for Mr. LOCKE's intent. It must be admitted in favour of the supposed objection, that, so far as it involves a distinct proposition (but without respect to Mr. LOCKE's meaning), it is perfectly true that the same process of reason equally applies to the observation of similitude and dissimilitude; but the apprehension of analogies cannot be compared with the perception of specific circumstances or characters in the existences of either mind or matter.

It is according to the various modes in which the habit of mind which tends to the exercise of this faculty may be involved with the other habitudes, or other powers or infirmities, that the several orders of intellect may be distinguished. One mind may be exercised in the amusing perversion of the same class of similitudes and relations, which may fill another with solemn or terrific visions. One may dwell in air-built castles, and luxuriate in imaginary bowers; another, not wiser, but exercising a different moral and intellectual tendency under the same law, may fabricate speculations, economical or metaphysical; a third may build on the experience of reality, and, with a cautious regard to truth and experiment, follow out the laws of Being by the light of the same intuitive apprehension. Each individual mind is governed by a constitutional adaptation of its habits of observation and association to its moral tendencies. The poet, alive to the impressions of external things, to all that imparts the deeper-impressions of passion or sentiment, looks through nature to gather the profound elements of beauty and power—of love and pity—terror and mystery. The light and social temper flutters among the cultivated fields of public life, and hoards its gall or honey for the world's taste. One powerful mind seems

to range through space and time for the elements of construction; another seems to dwell content in the jingle of a vocabulary, and find an abundant scope for exercise in the reconciliation of discordant syllables.

The application of these remarks to the criticism of poetry and other artistic branches of production is obvious.

The explanation of the manner in which this theory of association may be applied to the theory of moral sentiment is easy to apprehend. It is indeed obvious how every human affection must become an element of the idea with which it is habitually combined, whether it be place, incident, person, or face. But to follow out the subject in its details would require considerable digressions upon the nature of moral sentiment.

In like manner the associative processes subservient to the exercise of reason, already hinted at in the preceding Papers, would lead into further new, and not very easy discussions upon the principles and applications of pure reason.

The subject of dreams, which I have used to illustrate parts of this theory, belongs itself to the class of spontaneous associations. But I have proposed to myself to give this curious subject a separate discussion.

It only remains for me to observe, that this Paper completes the statement of the theory of association at which I have arrived by a method (so far as I am aware) not hitherto applied to the study of the human mind,—the *exclusive* use of observation, experiment, and analysis.